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On Language

BY WILLIAM SAFIRE

Bravo Zulu!

"CHAIN THAT YOUNG man to a computer," said John Tower, "and feed him baloney sandwiches." Thus did the chairman of the Reagan-appointed board to investigate Iran-contra arms dealings assign the task of writing "Appendix B" to Nicholas Rostow, a staff member borrowed from the State Department who had academic training in diplomatic history.

The result was the most stunning reverse appendectomy in government report-writing in years. (A reverse appendectomy puts an inflamed appendix *in*.) Mr. Rostow's riveting narrative, piecing together the sometimes contradictory evidence in a dramatic fashion, was not the portion of the report printed in most newspapers, but is the guts of the paperback book — The Tower Commission Report — that became an overnight best seller.

Lexicographers and linguists found that section to be of special interest because its selections from interoffice computer memos revealed, in raw form, the arcane lingo of the military bureaucrats on the National Security Council staff. We have at last available for scholarly analysis the down-home patois of our home-grown patsies.

"*Bravo Zulu* on Jenco's release," wrote former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane to Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, after an arms shipment obtained the release of an American held hostage in Lebanon. Colonel McFarlane used that same expression, *Bravo Zulu*, at the end of a message to Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, a fellow Naval Academy ring-knocker. Some reporters immediately suspected South African involvement in the dealings.

In Navy signal code, *Bravo* stands for *B* and *Zulu* for *Z*. Merriam-Webster dates the use of these terms from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization phonetic alphabet back to circa 1962 and 1952, respectively. When the two signals are put together as *B-Z*, or spoken or written out as *Bravo Zulu*, the message means "job well done."

Why? Why do the letters *B-Z* not mean "I'm busy, Titanic, try another ship"? Nobody I reached at the Naval Academy or the Naval Institute at Annapolis had the answer, though commendably nobody there refused to answer on constitutional grounds. Somewhat defensively, one old-salt librarian suggested the letters *B-Z* were used by signal communicators to mean "well done" for the same reason CB operators use *10-4* for "great" or "so long" — that is, for no reason at all.

Five unusual verb phrases also studded the appendix: *stand down, promise paper, went through the overhead, be teed up* and *stay off the skyline*. This has caused terrible headaches at the K.G.B. decoding station in Dzerzhinsky Square. In the spirit of international amity, these explanations:

"I was advised to do nothing and basically to *stand down*," testified Howard Teicher, then the National Security Council's Middle Eastern specialist. That same expression, using the past participle of *stand*, was repeated to me in this connection by Secretary of State George P. Shultz: "They told me the whole thing was '*stood down*.' "

The earliest use of *stand down* dates back to 1681, as a clause in a trial transcript directing a witness to leave the box after giving evidence: "You say well, stand down." In the 19th century, the infinitive phrase *to stand down* gained a nautical sense of "to sail with the wind or tide." In the 1890's, it became a sports term meaning "to withdraw from a race or game." In World War I, it became the opposite of the order *stand to*, an ellipsis for "stand to one's arms," or come on duty.

"*Stand down* is the order countermanding *stand to*," wrote Edward Samuel Farrow in his 1918 Dictionary of Military Terms. This sense of coming off military duty was transferred to "closing down an operation" by military men working in the diplomatic area during the past decade.

"If pressed for action you can credibly *promise paper* within the next few days," wrote the late Donald R. Fortier, deputy to Colonel McFarlane. This is the first appearance anywhere of this

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locution. Closest is the 1976 comment in The Economist of London that "the Tory government, facing defeat, had to promise a white paper on the subject to quell the mutineers." In the sense used in the N.S.C. memo, *paper* is a memorandum or other documentation to back up a position; the infinitive phrase *to promise paper*, I assume from the context, means "to promise a report in writing" to a senior who is worried about all these words flying around on the phone.

When informed of the Central Intelligence Agency's involvement in an early shipment of arms to Iran, then-Deputy Director John N. McMahon wrote a self-protecting memo for his file saying that he "*went through the overhead* pointing out that there was no way we could become involved ... without a finding."

Overhead, in this context, seems to be an intensified term for *roof*; the overhead has long meant "sky, firmament," and someone who goes through it is far angrier than the fiddler who stops after penetrating the roof. This sense may be influenced by computerese, which defines a *high-overhead function* as "one that places heavy demands on a computer," using *overhead* in an extended sense of "cost of doing business." (Observe the double meaning in "Larry Tisch has gone through the overhead.")

Now to *be teed up*. Was President Reagan informed by his aides of the risk inherent in a secret operation that, if it leaked, would be interpreted as a swap of arms for hostages? "The President was told," Donald T. Regan, then the White House chief of staff, told the Tower Commission, "but by no means was it really teed up for him of what the downside risk would be here as far as American public opinion was concerned."

The infinitive phrase *to tee up* is from golf, more recently from football: "to place a ball on a tee, a device for setting it in place above the ground, to be hit or kicked." In the passive voice used by Mr. Regan, the phrase means "be spelled out, as if to a child or someone unfamiliar with the language; be explained so that understanding is easy."

This is not to be confused with *to tee off*, which in golf means "to begin," and by extension, "to hit the ball or problem a long way on the first shot." However, the passive *to be teed off* does not mean "to have begun," but "to be very angry." If you are asked to use both phrases in a single sentence, try: "When President Reagan discovered the risk had not been properly *teed up*, he was *teed off*."

The nervous investor reading Donald Regan's teed-up sentence will be attracted by the former Merrill Lynch chairman's use of *downside risk*. This is a phrase probably first used in The Wall Street Journal on Sept. 10, 1953, according to Sol Steinmetz of Barnhart Books. The paper warned, "There is a downside risk in common stocks at this juncture. ..." *Downside*, first spotted in 1946, is based on the flip side of *upside*, which appeared in the 14th century's *upside down*.

One of the great grabbers of the Prof system (an I.B.M. acronym for Professional Office System, turned into a verb as in "Prof it to me") is the McFarlanism *to stay off the skyline*. In a memo from Oliver North to John Poindexter, the Marine Colonel reported to the Admiral that the Israeli contact, Amiram Nir, was being told not to make his presence known: "Nir has been told to *stay off the skyline* on this issue."

Use a computer to catch a computer: a fast check of Nexis, the computerized library of the past decade's media output, reveals only one other use of this phrase by anyone in the reported world. Bud McFarlane told Richard Halloran, a reporter for The New York Times, in September of 1985 that the recently released Rev. Benjamin F. Weir had been asked not to make major public appearances lest the other hostage-takers in Lebanon intensify their competition. "That had been discussed with Mr. Weir, Mr. McFarlane said," wrote Halloran, "and he had agreed to *'stay off the skyline'* until the chances for the release of the others could be clarified."

More drama permeates this phrase than the synonymous "remain out of sight" or "lie low" or even "keep a low profile." *Stay off the skyline* is not merely alliterative, but evokes a poetic image of publicity breaking over the spires of a great city. "Instead of the literal skyline, the outline of tall objects against the sky," suggests Sol Steinmetz, "it's possible that this expression refers to a 'skyline chart,' showing relative sizes on a graph."

In a coming article, more mining of this mother lode: *C.I.A. annuitant, disgruntlement, buy onto, wiring diagram, pallet, grosso modo.* Until then, *stay off the skyline.* (*Bravo Zulu*, Bud!) ■